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SUBJECT: SOUTHERN VIOLENCE: AUG 29-31 VISIT OF STAFFDEL
JANUZZI

REF: A. BANGKOK 2351

[B](#). 04 BANGKOK 6619

Classified By: CDA Alexander A. Arvizu. Reason 1.4 (d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: From August 29-31 Senate Foreign Relations Committee professional staff member Frank Januzzi visited Thailand's southernmost Muslim majority provinces for a follow-up assessment of the violence affecting the region. The recently announced Emergency Decree -- which has not yet had a noticeable impact -- is looked at with fear and suspicion by local Muslims but appears to be welcomed by Buddhist-Thais. Januzzi and poloffs heard mixed assessments from a wide range of interlocutors on the likelihood of success of the National Reconciliation Commission (NRC), criticism of the Thaksin administrations handling of the crisis, continued concern over inter-communal relations and suspicion of U.S. intentions. Most local observers indicated that the situation appeared to have stabilized to a degree, providing space for reconciliation efforts. However, the series of bombings on September 1, and the flight of 131 local Muslims to Malaysia, demonstrates that the level of violence remains high and the security situation is uncertain. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (C) From August 29-31 Senate Foreign Relations Committee professional staff member Frank Januzzi, accompanied by Embassy Bangkok poloffs, visited Narathiwat, Pattani and Songkhla provinces to assess the ongoing situation in Thailand's far South. Januzzi met local Islamic leaders, politicians, academics, business leaders and government officials and participated in roundtable discussions with professors and students at Prince of Songkhla University in Pattani. Januzzi also met with former Foreign Minister Dr. Surin Pitsuwan -- currently a Democrat Party MP and NRC member -- in Bangkok.

EMERGENCY DECREE HAS FEW LOCAL SUPPORTERS

[1](#)3. (C) The newly enacted Emergency Decree was a central topic of conversation during many of our discussions. As of yet the Decree had not had a noticeable impact on the ground in the South. However, many of our interlocutors expressed concern that the new law would worsen the situation and conflict with the work of the NRC. Abdulroman Abdulsamad, Chairman of the Narathiwat Islamic Committee, said most Muslims disagreed with the Emergency Decree. Democrat Party (DP) MP Cheaming Totayong from Narathiwat's Ruso district agreed, opining that the Decree could lead to government abuses both in the South and nationwide. The harshest criticism was heard from Dr. Surin Pitsuwan, who called the Emergency Decree the "epitome of divisiveness," and said that Muslims saw the law as a measure designed to "suppress" them.

[1](#)4. (C) Predictably, we heard support for the Decree from members of the Buddhist/Sino-Thai communities and from government officials. Pattani Vice Governor for Security Chanvit Vasayangkura claimed the Decree was an improvement on Martial Law and blamed the media for exaggerating the new law's potential impact. Wirawat Wattanayakorn, from the Narathiwat Industrial Council, said that he and many Buddhist-Thais felt that the newly issued Emergency Decree was "good" and would "frighten" the separatists. Although harshly critical of the Decree, Dr. Surin acknowledged that the new law was very popular among Buddhists in the South.

NRC HAS SUPPORTERS...BUT WILL THAKSIN LISTEN?

[1](#)5. (C) The work of the NRC appears to have wide support in South, and Commission members -- particularly Chairman Anand Panyarachun -- are widely respected. However, there appears to be growing pessimism about the likelihood of success of the NRC's efforts because of suspicion that Prime Minister Thaksin will ignore the forthcoming recommendations. Surin noted the NRC was dealing with "fundamental issues of sovereignty" -- including the use of "Yawi" as the second official language -- which may be difficult for some Thais to accept. He warned that Thaksin was using the NRC and Anand as a "shield" to deflect blame for the crisis. Several other

of our Muslim interlocutors agreed, saying that while Anand had the trust of the people in the South, they were doubtful that Thaksin would listen to or implement the NRC's recommendations.

16. (C) Not all southerners appreciate the NRC's accommodating approach. Narathiwat businessman Wirawat, echoing complaints heard from other southern Buddhists, complained bitterly that the government was conceding too much to Muslims -- at the expense of "Thais" -- while at the same time failing to protect "Thais." (NOTE: By "Thais" Wirawat was referring to Buddhist Thais only; he referred to ethnically Malay-Muslims as "Muslims." END NOTE) Abdulroman, an NRC Member, also acknowledged that local Buddhists were concerned the NRC was taking the side of the Muslim community. Dr. Surin dourly noted that even with the NRC's efforts it would take "decades" to solve the problems in the South given the current deep divisions.

HOW ARE RELATIONS BETWEEN COMMUNITIES?

17. (C) Januzzi heard anecdotal accounts about strained relations between the Buddhist and Muslim communities in the South. Although we saw little outward evidence of tension we heard that an unspecified number of people -- both Buddhist and Muslims -- continue to leave the region out of fear. Views on the state of relations between the two communities differed widely. Narathiwat businessman Wirawat characterized relations between the communities as "in a state of social breakdown," and noted that Buddhist continued to flee the rural areas of Narathiwat. Chawalit Kalambaheti, a retired Yala District Chief and current Vice President of the Songkhla Chamber of Commerce, expressed concern over propaganda leaflets found in the region that urged violence against Buddhists. Dr. Surin expressed deep concern, noting that he and former Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai have been privately discussing for some time how "the delicate balance between the communities has been broken." However, a Muslim NGO, the Pattani Vice Governor and the DP MP -- points across the political spectrum -- insisted that relations between the two communities remained close on the personal level.

HOW DO LOCAL RESIDENTS VIEW THE SITUATION?

18. (C) Many of our interlocutors, often lifetime residents of the South, reminded us that violence -- influenced by the inherent historical tension between the ethnically Malay population the Thai state -- had always been a fact of life in the far South. However, most agreed that current situation was the worst seen in living memory and had changed in character -- with a more urban focus and Islam playing a more central role. Narathiwat Islamic Committee Chairman Abdulroman said he and most southerners anticipated more violence on the horizon. Cheaming Totayong, another lifelong resident of Narathiwat, spoke for many when he called the current level of violence "the worst he had seen." Dr. Surin noted that increasing role of religion in politics in the South, particularly during the February 2005 elections.

19. (C) We did hear, however, a number of optimistic assessments of the situation. Vice Governor Chanvit said the situation on the ground had improved since Januzzi's last visit in March and claimed the government had been successful in efforts to reach out to local Muslims. Songkhla Chamber of Commerce members agreed, saying the situation had been improving over the past few months and that the government was on the right track.

WHY CAN'T THE GOVERNMENT GET THE JOB DONE?

10. (C) During many of our discussions we heard complaints of how government mistakes and bumbling had worsened or failed to address the situation, including disparaging remarks about incompetent police, intelligence and forensic work, and concerns over frequent changes in the government's command structure. Many of our interlocutors were also skeptical if the government had really developed a better understanding of the complex issues involved on the ground in the South. Narathiwat Islamic Chairman Abdulroman said he believed that many in the RTG still do not understand the roots of the violence and were not willing to acknowledge that besides separatism there are other factors influencing the violence, including drug trafficking, political opportunism, and turf battles between security forces.

11. (C) We heard some concern that government programs and poor police work were encouraging the over-reporting of violence as "separatist related." Anusat Suwanmongkhon, a leading business man in Pattani, pointed out that government compensation programs for victims of "separatist violence" had created "a moral hazard" by creating a financial incentive for locals to blame "separatists" for any violence. This phenomenon seems to be reinforcing the media's

sensationalist tendency to label all violence in the South as "separatist related," and the inclination of the police to avoid the hard work of investigating crimes by blaming "separatists" for all the violence.

DOES THAKSIN "GET IT?"

12. (C) Several of our interlocutors were quick to blame PM Thaksin for the government's failures. Narathiwat MP Cheaming said that Thaksin still does not understand the problem in the South and that he refuses to listen to others. Dr. Worawit Baru, Vice Rector at Prince of Songkhla University and NRC member, said he was worried that Thaksin was isolated and was not receiving the full information about what is going on in the region. He said that he and other NRC members are attempting to communicate directly with the PM about the situation. Surin blamed Thaksin's poor handling of relations between Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur -- which he characterized as being at an all time low -- for contributing to the worsening situation; "trust has broken down between the leadership of the two countries."

SEPARATISM VERSUS ALIENATION

13. (C) As in past trips, many of our interlocutors downplayed the role of separatism as the principle factor behind the renewed violence, while reminding us of the deep alienation felt by many Malay-Muslims towards the Thai government. Surin Pitsuwan believes that there are 10,000-15,000 people in the South who actively support separatism. Abdulroman from the Narathiwat Islamic Committee said most Muslims in the far South do not support the goals of the hard-core militants, but cautioned that the majority of Muslims in the South do feel a deep sense of "injustice" and noted that deep cultural divisions remained between southern Muslims and the government officials.

14. (C) Narathiwat MP Cheaming opined that the numbers of members in "operational" separatist groups remained very small -- and said their influence was minimal -- but cautioned that there is widespread sympathy amongst the larger Muslim population for "the separatist cause" because many locals had been personally affected by violence from state sources. A Muslim employee of the International Committee of the Red Cross agreed that many fellow Muslims do have serious disagreements with the RTG, but would not resort to violence and wanted to remain part of the Thailand.

PERCEPTIONS OF THE U.S. -- STILL A CONCERN

15. (C) Januzzi heard oft repeated rumors about U.S. involvement and intentions in the region. Surin Pitsuwan said he was very worried about rumors of U.S. involvement in violence in the South, claiming, "people say the CIA is all over the South." He warned that these rumors could lead to increased anti-U.S. sentiment in the region; "the entire South could turn against the U.S. if the rumors continue." During meeting with a group of undergraduate students from PSU Pattani we heard larger concerns about U.S. relations with the Muslim world. Several students -- while acknowledging how much they liked American movies and music -- said they believed that the U.S. is "anti-Muslim" and that the Iraq war had reinforced these perceptions.

COMMENT

16. (C) Following a reporting trip to the far South in September 2004, post commented that "Southern Thailand is not burning." One year later that remains the case. Despite the daily reports of shooting, bombing and arson attacks, life continues for the people in the South. It remains easy to travel throughout the region, with only the occasional roadblock -- often nominally manned -- to hinder the way. Even flash-points such as the Krue Se Mosque in Pattani remain open and accessible for obviously foreign visitors, with both local shop-owners and soldiers posted to watch over the scene eager to chat with rare "tourists." We recognize that the appearance of "normality" in the areas we visited may be deceiving. Things are more unsettled in more rural locales -- some Muslim villages have become "no-go" areas for RTG officials -- and the relative quiet we witnessed may signify little more than a populace that has grown inured to current levels of violence after over a year and a half of cyclical attacks and reprisals. The series of bombings on September 1 is a reminder of the uncertainty in the security situation. But the appearance of relative "calm" does give some context to the situation and provides room for some optimism that hope has not been abandoned.

17. (C) COMMENT, CONT. That being said, many people do clearly live in fear. There is recognizable tension between the government and Muslims -- and more disturbingly -- an increasingly stressful relationship between the Buddhist and

Muslim communities, both of which lay legitimate claim to be longtime southern residents. However, while relations have been tested between the two communities, there are no indications of any direct confrontations. The fact that this hasn't happened suggests that the traditional communal harmony of the region is still resilient in the face of deliberate attempts to create strife between neighbors in the South -- giving some guarded hope for the reconciliation efforts currently underway. END COMMENT

18. (U) Staffdel Januzzi did not have the opportunity to review this message
ARVIZU